Report
Zion National Park

1.0 Site Description

Designated as a national park in 1919, Zion National Park is noted for its natural and geographic beauty, including canyons, sandstone cliffs, creeks, and its pleasant climate. One of the key features of the park's 229 square miles is Zion Canyon, a geological marvel. A road runs down the middle of the Canyon, providing an astounding view for the vehicular visitor. The park has other sites, including trails, pristine sites and other geological formations, including the natural Kolob Arch spanning 310 feet.

The park is located in southwest Utah and accessible via I-15 and 46 miles from the St. George airport. By car, the park is approximately three hours from Las Vegas and five hours from Salt Lake City. The park is accessible via private vehicle, commercial tour bus and bicycle.

A variety of activities occur in the park including: scenic viewing, bicycling, camping, climbing, hiking, and horseback riding. Tram tours are provided in the upper portion of the Zion Canyon. There are also cultural and artistic activities and events in nearby communities including theatre shows, fairs, and art classes. Shuttles are provided for hikers to access backcountry trailheads.

The annual visitation level is approximately 2.5 million visitors. The peak season is long in duration and extends from April through October. Approximately 10 percent of visitors are in private tour groups and buses. From 25 percent to 30 percent of the visitors are from foreign countries. American visitors are largely from the western states. Visitors generally spend two days to see the sites of the park adequately.

A General Management Plan (GMP) is being drafted for the park as of November 1999. It will focus on visitor services and management of resources.

2.0 Existing ATS

The only Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) operating in the park includes the existing tram service. This service, operated by a concessionaire, follows a three-mile route and links the Zion Lodge to Temple of Sinawava – the final portion of the canyon road.

3.0 ATS Needs

A new extensive transit program is planned to be in operation by summer of 2000. This program will contain several elements that will help to curb the impacts of the increasing growth on the park.

It proposes a shuttle service along two individual routes. The main route, approximately eight miles each way, will service the Zion Canyon Road, which the majority of visitors frequent. The other route, approximately 3.5 miles each way, will connect the park to the neighboring town of Springdale. The shuttles will operate during peak times approximately every 10 minutes.

Ultimately the plan calls for 52 transit units, including 30 powered units and 20 trailers. Initially the system will begin with 29 powered shuttles and 19 trailers. Each powered unit and trailer will hold approximately 30 passengers. Individual powered units will operate on the shorter route to Springdale, while the powered units linked to the trailers will be used along the Zion Canyon Road. The powered units will be powered by propane, which is quieter and generates fewer emissions than diesel-powered vehicles.

The total capital cost for the system is estimated to be $7.8 million dollars. It is estimated to cost $2.5 million dollars per year to operate or $1.00 per visitor. Park entrance fees will be increased to assist in paying for the operation of the system.

After the new transit system is in place, personal vehicles will not be allowed in the canyon. Commercial tour buses will be allowed in the canyon for the first year, but the goal is to exclude them eventually from the canyon once the shuttle service is fully operational.

Such improvements as shuttle stops, streetscape modifications and the creation of a visitor transit center will be included. The program improvements will also include substantial increases to the parking supply. Parking lots will be provided and/or expanded in areas adjacent to the Visitor Center, and the Zion Canyon Theatre and other locations within the town of Springdale. A 400-car parking lot is being planned adjacent to the Visitor Center and should be open May 2000.

The transit system is new and innovative. It is one of the first transit systems of its magnitude to be implemented in a major National Park. It is a pilot project in that it relies on the cooperation of adjacent communities for the successful system integration with the park and the communities. This comprehensive transit system will help to significantly reduce congestion and has been embraced by neighboring communities including the town of Springdale.

The need exists to institute volunteer shuttle operations to serve the eastern portion of the park. This extension of transit service will help keep traffic off the eastern roads and serve as another entrance into park for visitors. This service will likely require the use of different vehicles other than those to be used in the proposed year 2000 system due to steeper grades in the eastern portion of the park. A study is warranted to determine the needs in this area.

Intelligent transportation systems will be installed in the year 2000 to assist in distributing transit-related information to approaching visitors before they arrive at the park. Signage and visitor information stations will be posted at sites on I-15 and U.S. 89 for visitors accessing the park from different directions. However, additional improvements to enhance the proposed ITS program will be needed in following years to develop other methodologies in distributing more information to a larger number of future visitors.

4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Zion National Park has been experiencing serious congestion as visitation levels have exploded over the last decade. It is not uncommon for traffic along the Zion Canyon Road to be gridlocked throughout the day during the peak season. In response to the growing congestion and the negative impacts on the park, an innovative transit program is being instituted in the park and will be in operation by summer of 2000. This transit program, described previously, is projected to help mitigate the traffic congestion impacts associated with the increasing growth.

Growth in visitation levels is very likely to continue as the population increases in the western states, the population demographics become older and the marketing efforts continue to encourage travel, tours and interest in the outdoors. Eventually upgrading and extending the proposed system will be warranted.

Concerns associated with operating the transit system are now materializing. Activities associated with monitoring, executing the operation of and providing signage for the new transit system and its elements are and will be critical issues for the park staff presently and in the coming years.

The park and the surrounding communities must determine how to provide housing for the employees of the park, concessionaires, and the new transit system operators. Employees often commute up to 50 miles to the jobs, because nearby Springdale is expensive and housing is scarce. Availability of affordable homes for existing and future employees is a concern for the regional communities. Eventually an extension of the shuttle system may be warranted to provide transit for these and other employees to the key destinations where they live. The contractor selected to provide the transit service may be responsible for providing housing or transportation for these employees.

5.0 Bibliography

Facsimile Transmission from Dave Karaszewski and Donald Falvey (Zion) to Kristin Kenyon (BRW). November 18, 1999.

Zion Map & Info. Internet site: http://www.zionpark.com/mapinfo.htm. Information printed November 17, 1999.

Zion National Park. Internet site: http://www.nps.gov/zion/. Information printed November 17, 1999.

6.0 Persons Interviewed

Dave Karaszewski and Donald Falvey. Telephone Interview. November 18, 1999

Dave Karaszewski and Donald Falvey. Telephone Interview. November 23, 1999